

COMMUNITY

More Than a Simple

Commute

City Councilman Gaines commutes with people with disabilities.

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ACPD COMMISSIONER

Alexandria City Councilman Ludwig Gaines accompanied Tara Hughes, vice chair of the Alexandria Commission on Persons with Disabilities and Jane Kachulis, outgoing Vice Chair of the ACPD on their daily work commutes to understand their unique challenges.

As a result, Gaines has a heightened appreciation regarding obstacles the disabled community faces, an appreciation he intends to translate into improved policy for transportation for the disabled community.

"You want to assure the community with disabilities is afforded equal opportunities and ease the burden for them," Gaines said. "It's government's function and role to do just that."

Gaines serves as the City of Alexandria's representative for the Northern Virginia Transportation Committee, which includes all jurisdictions in Northern Virginia. Gaines is also Alexandria's Representative to the Washington Council of Governments Transportation Planning Board.

During the outing, Gaines said it was obvious that people were aware of Hughes, who has a physical disability. She was his first commuting partner.

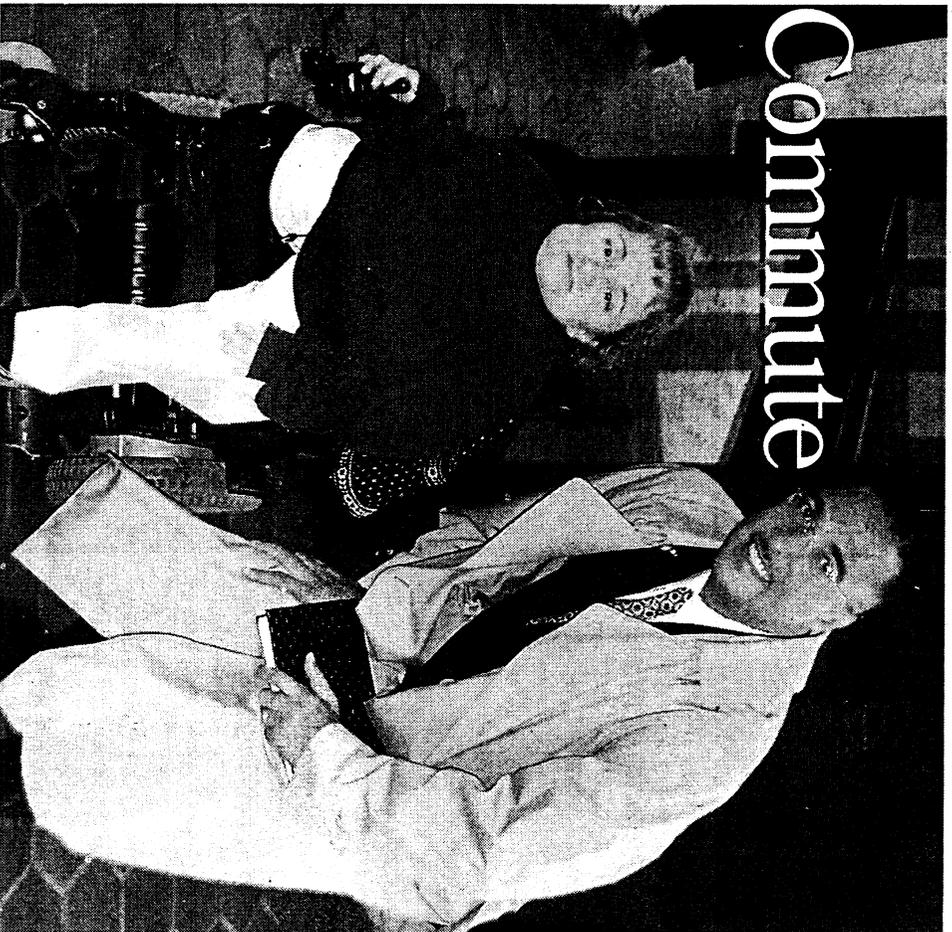
"Others are often watching me or staring at me, often with curiosity and occasionally with some feeling of pity. I have lived with this my entire life," Hughes said.

When she was a teenager she used to pretend she was a Hollywood celebrity and that was why she was receiving so much attention. She now makes direct eye contact with people, saying hello, which eases others and, "makes them realize we are all just people." Duncan, Hughes' lovable service dog, often accompanies her.

Gaines and Hughes took her usual route. They boarded the DASH bus to the Van Dorn Metro station and continued to Crystal City. There were no mishaps: the lifts on the buses were working; the elevators were operational and there was enough room on the train for Hughes' wheelchair. Sometimes Hughes' trip is more eventful as different components of her commute malfunction.

Jane Kachulis lives with hemiplegia, paralysis on her left side, causing mobility difficulties. Kachulis and Hughes were thankful Gaines cares about transportation issues and he is willing to work toward resolution of issues.

Kachulis uses a different method of public transportation. She qualified for the taxi service, Dot, the Alexandria para-transit system for people with disabilities and uses Diamond Transportation. She has driven with taxi driver, Tim Whitehead, for years. Kachulis' commute involves riding in the taxi to and from work. Kachulis has used this service over 15 years. Kachulis said that Whitehead even assists her with keeping her daily schedule and is "wonderful." Whitehead also taught himself sign language.



Tara Hughes and Councilman Ludwig Gaines begin their morning commute at Van Dorn Metro station.

Gaines called the experiences "enlightening." He supports policy to ensure persons with disabilities have priority seating in public transportation. Gaines wants mandatory fines if taxi drivers refuse to serve disabled people and to assure there are sanctions in violating this law.

"I believe in fairness for everyone and ensuring everyone has a full opportunity for meaningful participation in our community," Gaines said. He is committed to do-

ing everything to assure Alexandria's policies meet those goals.

Gaines summarized his experiences with Kachulis and Hughes and said he has a profound respect and admiration for them, and others, who face similar daily commuting challenges.

"As I see it, persons with disabilities are the real heroes and heroines. Me — I'm just doing my job," he said.

Oral reports - Gaines

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